Interactive participative risk communication as driver for effective risk and crisis management

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ABSTRACT

This paper will commence by defining several perceived roles of the government as a risk communicator. It is important to define and monitor the roles of the government as the information needs of the public and the perceived roles of the government will vary according to the specific risk contexts. The primary objectives of the governmental risk communication strategies will depend on the desired strategic outcomes of the risk managers or government officials on the one hand and on the specific information needs of the various stakeholders that are involved in the risk situation on the other hand. Depending on whether the government has to pick up an advisory, protective or redistributive role, the focus in the information strategy will be on information provision, (re)assurance or involvement.

Many scholars have emphasized the growing interest of practitioners and researchers in stakeholder participation in risk decision processes and bottom-up participative communication processes. It is no longer the question whether an input from diverse communities and stakeholders should be solicited and incorporated that occupies academics and governmental communication experts but it is a matter of finding the right way to do so. One of the main conclusions is that trust and confidence are probably the most crucial influential elements in effective risk management processes that involve stakeholder participation. We can state that trust is vital on all levels of analysis and that it is a primary condition to establish and implement risk communication strategies with direct impacts as well as long term effects. But when we formulate it the other way round, we can state that effective risk communication may increase trust levels and mitigate the trust crisis in governmental institutes, primarily by involving the public and stimulating two-way and bottom-up communication. Unfortunately, trust is more easily to be destroyed than to be created, as claimed by the trust asymmetry principle (Slovic, 1993). We confronted the trust asymmetry principle with the value similarity approach (G. Cvetkovich et al., 2002), which claims that people construct their own perceived trust levels more intuitively, basing themselves on the shared social identities or shared parallel understanding of a specific situation. Trumbo and McComas (2003) assumed that the mechanisms linking credibility, information processing and risk perception are very likely to be located in motivation, issue involvement, information-holding and the effect of message cues (Trumbo & McComas, 2003). Trust was also defined as a crucial driver for public support for policy decisions in the context of risk. One of the main remarks is that this relationship between perceived risk and the attitude towards government policy making is rather fragile in opaque risk contexts, characterized by a lack of concrete knowledge about the risk (B. J. Gerber & G. W. Neeley, 2005).

Finally, the paper emphasizes that governments and risk managers in general should commence with recognizing the complex and delicate nature of the risk communication process. This process incorporates several cultural, social and psychosocial constructs. Before risk managers are able to cross the bridges between experts' analytical opinions and lay people's risk perceptions, the bridges have to be constructed with tools that should be created by both players. By involving the various stakeholders as passive supervisors of the interests of their own group or even as active participants and contributors to the risk management processes, trust levels are actually becoming less important as they can influence the direction, the development or even the outcomes of certain decision processes themselves.

The empirical base of this paper will incorporate two structural equation models that depict the strong significant relationship between perceived governmental risk communication, public participation and risk regulation. The models are validated by data from three studies in three risk contexts: terrorism, financial economic crisis and the bird flu (H1N1). The paper will also suggest the methodology for the confirmation and validation of the model in the field of Electromagnetic Field (EMF) risks. These are examples of risks that are strongly socially and medially constructed. The main conclusion is that we should come to a (re)definition of the government as a risk communicator as the increase in civilian trust in the government as a communicator strongly influences the trust in the government as a risk regulator and that the need for public participation will be greater when the role of the government as a good risk communicator is not fulfilled.